

Assessment from the Perspective of Liberal Arts Colleges

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Introduction

There should be little question remaining in the minds of administrative and faculty leadership within the academy about whether greater attention is needed on defining learning objectives at the individual course, program, and institutional level and in improving our ability to assess student learning or, in other words, knowing when we have been successful. I want to assert that this is in our own interest as liberal arts colleges and universities, not because of the external pressures that exist.

First I will say a word about these external pressures. Whereas American higher education enjoys a superb reputation, many publics are clamoring for better prepared workers and better documentation of our results. While the Department of Education, which on occasion sounds more like a ministry than a department, will find that national testing is likely to have marginal effect on student learning at the level of post secondary education, they mimic the cry of the publics who insist on more accountability.

Historically in higher education legislation it was quite clear that the federal government shall not establish curricular requirements for higher education. Encroachment on this tenet has been gradual but noticeable with new regulations and their interpretation. It was in 1989 or 1990 that it was stated that all accreditation agencies in their standards must insist that the institutions they represent demonstrate standards for academic achievement. All that is required in that language today, in the reauthorization that is ahead, is four more words to take us to the next step of accountability to the Secretary of Education. Therefore, the sentence would read: Colleges and universities must demonstrate standards for academic achievement “using measures of comparability.” Then rather than each college and university measuring its own student learning objectives according to its stated mission, there likely would develop a standardized measure defined by the federal government that might not take into account the reasonable differences among us that have characterized American higher education. Whereas I do not think our attention on assessment should be considered a defensive move, the pressure is certainly there.

Putting aside these externally imposed pressures for a moment, however, I am on the side of the argument that says the academy itself, and we as faculty and administrative leaders, have a high degree of responsibility to articulate more carefully the learning objectives of our colleges and universities at the course, program, and institutional levels, and to assess systematically and regularly our own performances. It is in our own best interests to build a climate of inquiry; we must be sure that we are learning organizations ourselves.

Especially as liberal arts colleges and universities, we carry the freight for an education focused not just on global competition, though we want our graduates to be able to compete successfully in these markets, but for a liberal arts and sciences education that encourages critical thinking and civic engagement; to resurrect an old phrase, “education for life not just for a livelihood.” And if this education is important for our graduates, then it is incumbent upon us to be able to demonstrate that we are achieving what we believe to be most important.

Two Recommendations

From this context, I will limit my presentation to two rather obvious points. They are both more process recommendations that draw from my experiences at the University of Redlands. I do not intend to be presumptuous in using the University of Redlands to illustrate these ideas, as we too have additional work to do, but it is what I know best.

The First Recommendation

We who are presidents, chancellors, and academic executives need to create the vision and set expectations. We need to make clear that assessing the quality of our learning and teaching environment fits within our ongoing responsibilities and is not just an add-on that will surface with each accreditation cycle. I’m sure this advocacy can take a variety of forms but I want to only illustrate from actual experience what this might look like.

- We developed an annual planning document that served as a template for administrative tasks. For the past several years that document included as one of the major themes several specific tasks that focused on student learning. With the need for academic leaders to practice “selective neglect” just to stay afloat, the details of the work required to assess effective learning will likely be one of the tasks neglected, with business as usual, unless our expectations about creating a culture of evidence are made very clear.
- As a complement, we need to recognize the need for additional resources that may be required to be more than superficial in this effort. This might take the form of released time for faculty, funding for faculty development (hard money to find), or mentoring by faculty and administrators whose own disciplines or experiences may bring resources to the party.

The Second Recommendation

It is important to recognize that the actual work of assessment of student learning must be embedded in the faculty itself, or either it will not be done or it will have a ring of superficiality. By this I mean a commitment from the faculty as individuals but also a commitment that is embedded in the governance structure itself. Again I must use real examples that have been enormously helpful at the University of Redlands.

- To involve the faculty as a whole, the agenda of several fall faculty retreats have included assessment of student learning.
- During a Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) review, a university steering committee was co-chaired by our academic vice president and the elected faculty chair of the academic assembly, and three committees co-chaired by two members of the faculty directed the bulk of the work that led to our educational effectiveness report.
- Possibly more important than either of the above in the long term, are the responsibilities accepted by the Committee on Academic Planning and Standards of the Academic Assembly (composed of elected faculty representatives from all divisions of the university as well as the registrar, the director of the library, and the vice president for academic affairs as non-voting *ex officio* members). This standing committee of our academic assembly specifically includes in its portfolio “accreditation and related matters,” the review of “new and significantly revised academic programs and degrees,” “program and departmental reviews,” and “academic assessment.” In this manner, academic assessment is built into the formal structure of faculty governance.
- The work being done on the Capstones at the University of Redlands serves as a cogent example of assessment of student learning being imbedded in the faculty and the governance structure itself. We require all students in all degree programs to complete some form of capstone activity. It can be seen as the culmination of the undergraduate major or a graduate program. The capstone in a given department or program may need to respond to the specific needs of students who are planning on different next steps, it can serve different pedagogical purposes, or it may be structured to deepen students’ experiences across content areas. Some departments emphasize theory, whereas others design the capstone around practice; still others emphasize skills.

Real progress is only going to occur if the faculty are engaged directly. In this illustration from the University of Redlands, the Committee on Academic Planning and Standards (CAPS) in collaboration with the College and School Curriculum Committees have been addressing the policy dimension of this matter by developing clearer expectation for this dimension of a Redlands education and providing guidance to departments and programs on just what capstones are intended to accomplish, how they can do so, and how they can know when the goals and objectives have been accomplished. In the process, best practices are being shared among departments and programs.

The following are general conclusions from my observations:

- Whereas it may be quite appropriate and useful to name a new office or hire new leadership with a title such as assessment coordinator, this model of overlaying administrative leadership in my opinion is not as important and possibly not even

as successful as embedding the assessment of student learning into existing structures that take advantage of and fit existing faculty cultures.

- A complementary action is to link the processes to existing structures of faculty governance rather than creating new structures and thereby new work.
- Take advantage of leadership from faculty who understand and value excellent teaching and who have benefited in their own work by direct measures of assessment.